

First Nations Summit Meeting

Hon. Michael de Jong
Minister of Aboriginal Relations and Reconciliation

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Check against delivery

Thank you very much, Chief Judith Sayers. First of all, let me say what an honour it is to be here. I'd like to thank my friend Chief Shane Gottfriedson for making it possible for me to attend, and for making me feel so welcome in the traditional territories of Kamloops Indian Band.

I want to recognize as well that I am here with my colleagues Claude Richmond and Kevin Krueger, both MLAs representing the area. I should note, Chief Gottfriedson, that both of them are great supporters and proponents of the work taking place on the part of Kamloops Indian Band.

I want to thank the First Nations Summit task group – Grand Chief Ed John, Dave Porter and of course, Chief Judith Sayers. Also, I want to acknowledge and thank our meeting co-chairs, Daniel Watts and Leah George-Wilson, for the opportunity to be here speaking with you.

It's been a long day so far now for many of you. The sun is shining. I think these proceedings might have begun with a golf tournament earlier this week, on Tuesday. Now, I have seen the golf course, and it is, Chief Shane, a difficult one. The time I played it, I must tell you that the bunkers and the rough became disturbingly a part of my traditional territory on that golf course. But, it's a beautiful facility.

And I should tell you, as well, when I received the invitation to speak, I was immediately excited and a little bit nervous, too. Nervous because the First Nations Summit has proven so instrumental and played such an important role in creating the New Relationship – the new feeling we are talking about and experiencing in the Province of British Columbia today.

The leaders of this organization, Grand Chief Ed John, Chief Judith Sayers and Dave Porter, all have extremely deep roots and have dedicated a tremendous part of their lives to the cause of promoting a sense of equality, achieving a degree of reconciliation, working to correct some of the injustices of the past and encouraging other governments to do the same.

That can be a thankless job at times, but while I was preparing to speak here today, I was mindful of their lifetime of dedicated effort. And so, I come here with a degree of

humility, recognizing that they and others in this room have chartered a similar path and dedicated themselves in a similar way to improving the lives of the people whom you represent, and whom we represent.

I want also, if I may, with the permission of the chairs, to acknowledge the presence here of Elders – in person and perhaps also in spirit. It is the Elders who have through the ages taught many of us about the importance of the work that is undertaken here. Through their patience and perseverance, the Elders have helped us arrive at this point along the journey. It's a journey that is far from ending; it is only just beginning.

I'm new to my post, and I hope I can dedicate myself, Chief Judith, to continuing the work that has begun and shown such promise. I'm certain that along the way, we'll continue to learn from the people who have so much to teach.

I'd like to talk about the New Relationship. A couple of days ago, I was with the British Columbia Union of Indian Chiefs at their annual general assembly. I made an observation there, and I'll make it again now. I believe that in a few decades people will look back to March of 2005 as seminal time in the New Relationship we have been building with one another. It will be regarded as a seminal time because thanks to the support that you offered and the vision of your leadership, something called the Leadership Council came into being. It was a group of individuals that included the First Nations Summit and others who either are here with us today, or have been here. I think Chief Shawn Atleo was here earlier and Chief Stewart Phillip too.

I want to emphasize on behalf of my two colleagues here today that the commitment and vision required to make the New Relationship a reality on the part of the Province of British Columbia comes from the very top – from a premier, from Premier Gordon Campbell. Premier Campbell has dedicated himself and the government he leads to working cooperatively in a spirit of mutual respect and civility, towards achieving the goals of reconciliation and recognition of the rights that exist for aboriginal peoples and First Nations in the Province of British Columbia.

That spirit is an emphasis, a sentiment, an emotion that now transcends every aspect of government. The challenge is for the collective will that exists in the government and on the part of the Leadership Council to operate on the ground level and show some tangible benefit for the people themselves. After all, that is the objective we are trying to achieve.

The words are very profound in my view. The New Relationship document begins with a phrase that, as Grand Chief Ed John reminded me at our first meeting, a breakfast meeting a couple of days ago in Prince George, were words selected with great care and hold great meaning. Perhaps, at the end of the day, they are words that hold more meaning than any of the legal phraseology or maxims that tend to preoccupy us during discussions that have taken place. "We are all here to stay."

We are all here to stay. Could anything be truer? Could anything be more relevant than that simple statement? They are words and they will remain words if we don't find a way

to act on them to improve the lives of the people we represent. That is the challenge. But it's a good start. It's a very good start. And some work has already taken place – the creation of the \$100 million New Relationship Trust.

Nathan Matthew was here and I suspect he still is, somewhere, in the midst of conducting meetings. It's interesting to consider what is more difficult: a situation in which there are no resources or a situation in which there are some limited resources, and we have to make decisions about how to use them. It's not a simple task, but a task that the trustees, the First Nations themselves, will tackle with thoughtfulness and wisdom. And they will make decisions about how best to employ those resources.

Chief Judith, you were very kind in alluding during your opening remarks to some of the initial steps that have been taken. For example, we moved from forest and range agreements to forest and range opportunities revenue sharing. But none of the initial steps have been perfect and none in and of themselves can resolve issues that have developed over decades, if not centuries. But these steps are a start and hopefully they form a foundation we can build on, in the context of the New Relationship. That is very much at the heart of what the provincial government, what Premier Gordon Campbell, Kevin Krueger, Claude Richmond and I have as an objective.

I hope today in a very small way I can convey to you how important it is for us to continue the dialogue that exists with the Leadership Council. It was through the Leadership Council that Grand Chief Ed John and the Premier had a discussion – in a very informal way, as Grand Chief Ed reminded me – about the need of British Columbians to better understand the history of aboriginal peoples.

So, as we talk about the year 2008 and the 150th anniversary of the colony that was British Columbia, it is entirely appropriate – dare I say necessary – that we take greater steps to ensure that people understand that the colonial days were only the beginning of a later stage in the history of this land. And from that conversation between Grand Chief Ed John and Premier Gordon Campbell came the idea about telling our story, the story of First Nations. That gave rise to David Porter developing a committee to look at how that story might be told.

There is no single answer. It's not just about writing a song or recording a video. It needs to be more than that. But perhaps the visual is a good place to start. Through David Porter's committee and the work of Deputy Minister Lorne Brownsey, who is here on my far right, the idea of telling some of that history developed – maybe by recording some video footage for a documentary, if you will, about some of that history.

I hope the First Nations Summit Task Force will accept today the fact that I have asked Deputy Minister Brownsey to transfer to the First Nations Summit \$100,000 to begin the work of telling our story. This will help to begin the work of ensuring that British Columbians have a better understanding of our collective history in this land and of the unique history of First Nations. The project is not an end of itself, but again, it's another small step, perhaps, in the right direction.

We are at a unique stage in our evolving history as it relates to treaties. We've just heard from all five of the B.C. treaty commissioners prior to this segment of the program. There are treaty tables that are showing very promising prospects for achieving something that in 14 years we simply have not achieved – the emergence of a comprehensive treaty settlement package from the B.C. Treaty Commission process. That will be, for all parties involved, a day of great celebration. And I hope it is a day that comes very soon, and I believe it may come within a matter of weeks.

For others, the process continues to be fraught with frustration, and I believe that is reflected, as well, in the Treaty Commission's annual report that became public just a few days ago.

This will be my first opportunity to emphasize to you and commit to you the desire of the provincial government under Premier Gordon Campbell to ensure that the opportunities to move ahead through the treaty process extend to all who wish to participate. And yes, there are challenges around capacity on the part of all three parties. But our objective is to ensure and do everything we can to ensure that all who wish to move forward are able to do so in a timely and expeditious way. This is something that is easy to say. I do understand that it's more difficult to put into effect on the ground.

But for the New Relationship, I don't believe that we would be where we are now in the treaty process. That's because at the heart of the New Relationship there is a recognition of the need to think differently about how we communicate with one another to embrace the principles of respect, reconciliation and recognition in ways that have not existed in the past.

My colleagues and I are members of a government that set out in its second mandate to achieve some goals. We want British Columbia to be the healthiest society in North America. We want British Columbia to be the most literate, best educated society in North America. We want British Columbia to practise the highest standards of environmental stewardship in North America. We want British Columbia to lead the continent in terms of job creation.

None of that is possible, none of that will be possible if the gap that has historically separated First Nations from the rest of British Columbia and Canadian society is not bridged. That's a tall order. It is one that I daresay virtually everyone sitting around this table has dedicated themselves to. And it's at the heart of the goal the premier and the government have set for us: to work together to ensure that there is equality and equality of opportunity, and to work together to reverse some of the trends that have emerged from all those horrid statistics over the years, decades and centuries.

Was there, is there, has there ever been a time in our history when it was more appropriate to say we need one another? Has there ever been a better time in our history to act upon that realization and that reality?

I have a new job. I'm tremendously excited. I'm tremendously excited to be asked by a premier who has established as a number one priority the reconciliation of issues that have plagued First Nations for too long – to be asked to play a role.

Years from now, I believe that we will look back on this time and genuinely be able to say that was when a change occurred. That was when a New Relationship did develop. That was when we collectively set our minds and hearts to capitalizing on that New Relationship to improve the lives of the people we represent in the communities where we live.

So to the executive and to the co-chairs, let me say again what a great honour it has been for myself and my colleagues to be invited to attend here today. I am looking forward very much to attending the discussions in future, and to the great things that we stand on the cusp of accomplishing for the people who are depending upon the leadership that exists here in this room.

Thank you very much.